

CULTURE

# Zip It

Erica Jong's stunning self-absorption

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SHARE AS GIFT  SAVE 

Attention, Bill Clinton. Erica Jong is waiting for your call. “I can’t get in touch with Bill,” she announces in her most recent memoir. “He has to get in touch with me.” She does everything short of giving her phone number. She agonizes about pleasing him in the sheets (“I wonder if I’m trashy enough”). She reassures him she’s cleared things with her spouse (“My husband is cool about our affair”).

No matter that it’s been three decades since Jong published *Fear of Flying*, the book that presumably emboldens her to proposition American presidents. It careened to the top of best-seller lists after its publication in 1973, revolutionized the way people thought about women’s erotic desire, provoked translations into two-and-a-half-dozen languages, and turned its thirtysomething author into a celebrity. It also drove her to eternal self-imitation. Each of the seventeen books Erica Jong has written since has been an increasingly desperate postscript to her first novel.



*Fear of Flying* itself was a good book. And this even  though—or perhaps because—its reputation departs radically from its reality. It is my suspicion that the majority of the 18 million people who bought it didn't read it, or read only the paragraphs on which its notoriety was based. This means the passage about “zipless fucks” in which Isadora Wing (minutely based, like all of Jong's narrators, on herself) details her fantasy of elated anonymous sex—sex without strings, preambles, or consequences; sex with a stranger on a train, an itinerant Romeo who comes, sees, conquers, and disappears into the mists of the station. “The zipless fuck was more than a fuck,” intones Isadora. “It was a platonic ideal. Zipless because when you came together zippers fell away like rose petals ... Your whole soul flowed out through your tongue.” “And,” she adds abruptly four pages later, “I have never had one.”

But the book's whole mythology depends on the availability—and ecstasy—of the zipless fuck. It is because of this availability that numbers of women left their husbands in the glory years of *Fear of Flying*, and that men sent Jong requests for underwear. It was, after all, the middle of the sexual revolution. The birth-control pill had been approved in 1960. By 1966, Masters and Johnson had announced that traditional sexual intercourse was, for half the human race, anticlimactic. The *Hite Report* confirmed as much a few years later. Many a young woman felt invited—or compelled—to embrace erotic experiment. But with possibility came fear—not least, fear of ignorance. Suddenly everybody wanted to know what they should be doing, and feeling, in bed. *The Joy of Sex* appeared on coffee tables across the nation. Firsthand accounts of women's desire were at a premium.

Enter Erica Jong and her zipless fuck. But here's an irony: *Fear of Flying* demonstrates the *un*availability of the zipless fuck. Far from being an inspirational story (as it is routinely billed) of a woman's escape from a dead marriage and discovery of erotic pleasure and independence, it's the tale of a woman who ditches her husband only to find in the arms of a lover first impotence and frustration, then heartbreak and abandonment. The end of the novel has Jong's protagonist returning ruefully to her spouse: she stalks him around European capitals, begs a receptionist for the key to his hotel room, and admits herself into his bathtub in anticipation of his arrival. As an image of female liberation, it's hardly up to snuff. The heroine—naked and prone—awaits the forgiveness of her husband. Not flying in the open skies, as the novel's title (and Isadora's surname) suggests she might—but waterlogged in the lavatory of a man. (Improbably, Jong herself appears to mistake her novel's closing scene for a vision of freedom. “I wasn't going to grovel,” she has Isadora boast as she reclines in Mr. Wing's steaming bath. No? If not  only be because she knows the man

she married is sufficiently weak to take her back without any elaborate rituals of contrition.)

But if *Fear of Flying* is hardly a tale of women's emancipation, it nonetheless raises arrestingly honest questions about desire and commitment, fantasy and fidelity. It is this honesty, along with the protagonist's boisterous energy and foul-mouthed wit, that once made the book remarkable. "What was it about marriage anyway?" Isadora asked. "Even if you loved your husband, there came that inevitable year when fucking him turned as bland as Velveeta cheese: filling, fattening even, but no thrill to the taste buds, no bittersweet edge." Jong put her finger on a real wound. But the only salve she's offered over the next seventeen books is that of interminable adultery. And spread over the decades, that salve gets both thinner and more bitter. The voice in Jong's latest book, *Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life*, is no longer the voice of her spunky first heroine. It is a cynical voice—a catty, peeved, snobbish, bored, and boring voice. It is the voice of a woman who, for all her talk of love, has never learned to love. Jong in her sixties is at once too much and too little like Jong in her thirties.

*Seducing the Demon* aims to double as autobiography and writer's guide. Short lists of rules for "fledgling writers" ("Forget intellect"; "There are no rules") alternate with lengthy recyclings of the author's old affairs. Sisyphean repetition has been Jong's formula since her first novel, but with each enlistment the formula grows feebler and Jong's memory dimmer. The anecdotes are darkened, their author sounds nastier, and the honesty that was once her peculiar virtue hardens into a pose.

Consider the tale of "Dart," as Jong calls one of her more significant others in *Seducing the Demon*. He was known as "Bean" in her 1984 novel, *Parachutes and Kisses*, and identified in *Fear of Fifty* by his full roman-numeraled name, Will Wadsworth Oates III (not to mention by his curved penis—anatomy always being a more faithful mnemonic device for Jong than psychology). In *Parachutes*, Bean is portrayed as the heroine's soul mate: for 400 pages he treats her like gold, and she sobs that she "never" wants them "to be parted." By *Fear of Fifty*, her prince has morphed into a boy toy she spots "on a Nautilus machine." He is still, however, "essentially kind," and supports her fiercely through a breast-cancer scare—even after she has rebuffed his marriage proposals and tired of him. Reenter Dart in *Seducing the Demon*. By now a two-decade-old memory for Jong, he has transformed into a monster. Mean, lecherous, and stupid, he now meets her by crashing his vehicle into her house. When he attempts to renew their friendship as she is writing *Demon*, she casts him away brutally: "Dart had lost his looks, his youth. He was no longer twenty-six as he'd been when we met." (Never mind that Jong is fifteen years his senior.) 'Meat from a Truck' is what I would call this chapter if Dart were still worth writing a novel about." But, she scoffs, "the me  ger fresh."

Who *is* this heartless woman? Could it really be the late twentieth century's great defender of erotic love? The woman who claimed, in *Fear of Fifty*, that she still adored each one of her many ex-partners, that in fact "I even love them *better* than I did when we were together, because now I have more empathy"? *Empathy*? The only emotion visible in the hodgepodge of Jong's latest "memoir" is narcissism. All her politics have dwindled to vanity—and a vague sense of aggrievement. Perhaps she feels the human race hasn't accorded her the adulation she deserves, but where once she was the Feminist Who Loved Men she now comes off as the Slut Who Hates Them. Where once she made some display of solidarity with other women, it is now plain that she dislikes, disregards, and fears them.

Take her attack on female writers her age, or younger. They envy her "rich life," she tells us glibly, the whole lot of them. She has to kick herself under the table to pay attention to them at dinner parties. That said, she has some advice for them: Be loyal to your sex! Don't review another woman's books badly—to do so is a sign of "self-hatred"! Putting aside the gross anti-intellectualism and horde mentality implicit in such a proposition, it is jarring for its hypocrisy. Stand by your sisters, says the career vamp of American letters? (Not content merely to detail, in *Seducing the Demon*, how she destroyed Martha Stewart's marriage, Jong also assaults us with all the withering things Stewart's husband allegedly said about Martha in flagrante delicto.) Don't hurt other women, says the writer who vociferously spurns her mother, reviles her sisters, and lingers sadistically on how the "schoolteacher" wife of a "famous" Irish poet she "fuck[ed]" and discarded in a fancy London hotel sits home and "pays [his] bills"? *This person draws the line at a bad book review?*

Love (like all great undertakings) is a messy matter. It is not my contention that it can—or even should—be innocuous. When Jong was poised to be its feminist champion, in the 1970s, she brought to the discussion both stinging candor and fiery commitment. Today, her sole commitment is to her own fame. Her sole candor is strategic titillation. When she calculates that it will keep us turning the page, she offers sordid details from her (ever more distant) sexual past. In so doing she avoids the far more difficult, and potentially interesting, question of how she lives *now*. Jong has been married, at this point, for roughly fifteen years. She has always said that marriage and erotic intensity—even emotional intensity—are incompatible. Well, *are* they? She chokes off the question with a line or two about tantric sex. She prefers to elaborate on the blow job she gave her publisher in the early '70s.

And even in an account of this ilk, her lies are legion. Incapable of self-criticism, Jong proves almost touchingly unfit to analyze her own motives. No matter what she does, she is always right and forever wronged. So even as she—an unpublished novelist at the time, demanding half a million dollars for a novel her elderly publisher knows nothing about—takes his "flabby prick" in her mouth, she is not, she emphatically tells us, a "gold-digger girl." She is a . . .  "worker"! She simply "felt sorry for his

age.” Her only regret? That the old moneybag did not give her a priceless first edition of poetry into the bargain; he gave her only a facsimile. “I didn’t,” smarts Mother Teresa, “give him a facsimile blow job!”

Jong’s only real love is for the glory she imagines will greet her writing—writing that is notable, unfortunately, for its comic clumsiness: “I wish I could lower my standards,” she complains. “I could write faster, but the books would suck.” The books *do* suck. Each of them, these days, is about one thing: finishing it. “[G]o home and finish the book,” she has her mother say at the close of *Fear of Fifty*. “The story is not over yet,” she reminds us at the end of *Seducing the Demon*. Jong’s prose, increasingly, is about prose. Even her pornographic fantasies—about Bill Clinton, the poet Ted Hughes, and, indeed, William Shakespeare—pale next to her reveries about the literary laurels that await her. “I dream,” she tells us in *Seducing the Demon*, “that I have written an amazing book.”

Dream on, Erica. This book—like your last dozen—is amazing only for its mediocrity. It is amazing only for its meanspiritedness, its tedium, its awkward prose, and its stunning self-absorption. Literature can bear a great deal of self-absorption, but Jong may well have overshot the mark. Literary aspiration, at the end of the day, is a limited plot device. Especially in the absence of literary talent. Muses—like men—tend to eschew those who chase them exclusively; single-minded pursuit frightens as often as it flatters them.

The best way to write is to have something to say. For all her aggressive loquacity, Erica Jong has run out of topics. She has run out of interests. She has run out of empathy for other people. And yet the war in which she once fought—the war to reconcile passion with feminism—goes on. The ends are still just. And the stakes are as high as ever.

*Photograph by Sophie Bassouls/Corbis Sygma*

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## Fear of Flying

By Erica Jong

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## Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life

By Erica Jong

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